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THE SEDUCTION OF THE REAL

PHILOFICTION BAUDRILLARD, HYPERREALITY, IMAGES, REAL, SEDUCTION, SIMULATION

"The world is an illusion." —Valentinus

"...images precede the Real." —Jean Baudrillard

"What I call Integral Reality is the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is 'liberated'..."¹ Child of Kant and Mani, Pyrrho and Valentinus, and of all those for whom the Real is illusion and delusion – delirium, Baudrillard's *objective ironies* formulate the underlying features

of our panic ridden world of impulse and evil, the irreality of our becomings. As he'd say in *The Evil Demon of Images*:

I would like to conjure up the perversity of the relation between the image and its referent, the supposed Real; the virtual and irreversible confusion of the sphere of images and the sphere of a reality whose nature we are less and less able to grasp. There are modalities of this absorption, this confusion, the diabolical seduction of images. Above all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true. As simulacra, images precede the Real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the Real and its reproduction.²

In the above Baudrillard's play on "conjure" as if the duplicitous enactment of either a magical performance or a juggler's hat-trick escapades of the street huckster would enable him through the perversity of the image and the Real to astonish or delude us. This severance of sign and signifier is an old story, one Baudrillard would champion as a part of what one critic terms his "post-Marxist Gnosticism".³ One should also not forget Baudrillard's acceptance of Georges Bataille's thought of excess and *aristocratic gaze* as influences upon his own critical apparatus. In a 1976 review of a volume of Bataille's *Complete Works*, Baudrillard writes: "The central idea is that the economy which governs our societies results from a misappropriation of the fundamental human principle, which is a solar principle of expenditure" (1987: 57). In the early 1970s, Baudrillard took over Bataille's anthropological position and what he calls Bataille's "aristocratic critique" of capitalism that he now claims is grounded in the crass notions of utility and savings rather than the more sublime "aristocratic" notion of excess and expenditure. Bataille and Baudrillard presuppose here a contradiction between human nature and capitalism. They maintain that humans "by nature" gain pleasure from such things as expenditure, waste, festivities, sacrifices, and so on, in which they are sovereign and free to expend the excesses of their energy (and thus to follow their "real nature"). The capitalist imperatives of labor, utility, and savings by implication are "unnatural," and go against human nature.⁴

This sense of the dichotomy between the natural and unnatural at the heart of capitalism would lead Baudrillard into heresy and heterotopic thought. As Kellner relates it "Baudrillard's thought does contain a curious mixture of Manicheanism and Gnosticism that identifies with the principle of evil mixed with an ironic skepticism. The result of this mixture is a unique form of cynicism and nihilism which plays with philosophical and other categories, debunks standard philosophical theorizing and offers provocative alternatives." (ibid.)

As I've written of Bataille's notions on Gnosticism and base materialism in the past I'll not go into depth here, only to remind the reader that for Bataille evil is a creative principle of action rather than uncreative. In his essay *Base Materialism and Gnosticism* Georges Bataille will give a rather different reading of our ancient spiritual systems: "In practice, it is possible to see as a *leitmotiv* of Gnosticism the conception of matter as an *active* principle having its own eternal autonomous existence as darkness (which would not be simply the absence of light, but the monstrous *archontes* revealed by this absence), and as evil (which would not be the absence of

good, but a creative action). This conception was perfectly incompatible with the very principle of the profoundly monistic Hellenistic spirit, whose dominant tendency saw matter and evil as degradations of superior principles.” 5

So that against physicalist conceptions of matter as mechanistic and passive (dead) Bataille would align his conceptions with those much like quantum theory in which the pre-Ontological universe is a sub-atomic realm of forces that generate the realm of being we see around us. Even the use of such notions as “dark energy” and “dark matter” in modern cosmology signals that there are unknown forces that can be simulated or modeled but that cannot be observed directly. In this sense our universe has recently been seen as pure simulation or holographic. George Smoot has given credence to the simulated theory of holography. Today’s physics is charting out territories of inquiry for examining the emergence of consciousness, that it is informed by the language of virtual reality to articulate theories of simulation and holography—all of this demonstrates the ways in which “science” is always, to use a term proposed by science historian John Tresch, a cosmogrammatical apparatus. That is, science captures the world-making forces within which it finds itself located, whilst simultaneously recodifying these worldings into an order that aspires to “objectively” describe a world, a kind of cosmological thermometer that displays the sensibilities of an age. This lighthearted presentation by astrophysicist and Nobel Prize recipient George Smoot gives a layman’s overview of simulation theory and the “holographic universe” as it has been put forth in quantum physics. 6

For Baudrillard the realm of reproduction, the world of modern technological media, our communications and systems of “mechanical reproduction of reality” (Benjamin) are not what they seem to be. There is a sense that the images we see in cinema, television, the internet, newspapers, photographs, etc., both analog and digital capture or represent reality – the Real. Baudrillard tells us that this would be a mistake, an error. For in truth they “only seem to resemble things, to resemble reality, events, faces,” and in fact they do appear to “conform, but their conformity is diabolical.” (14) The use of “diabolical” is telling, and one might refer such a deliberate use of it back to Descartes demon:

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. But this is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my

peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.⁷

Whether Descartes' was aware of Gnosticism or not is irrelevant, his reversion to the spirit of skepticism and his use of the notions of the habitual sleeper whose normalized entrapment in the senses ("I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep") allows him to remain in a happy state of ignorance and bliss. Even the notion that to be awakened from this state of illusion and delusion would entail "hard labour" and certain amount of trepidation aligns Descartes willingly or not with the ancient heresiarchs of Gnosticism and dualism. It's the echo of this ancient skepticism deriving from Pyrrho, and the dualism of the Gnostics that in some ways pervades many of the problems from Descartes onward in philosophy and the sciences.

For Baudrillard the situation is quite different from Descartes. When Baudrillard evokes or conjures the "principle of evil" or in Descartes allegory, "an evil demon" etc., his aim is more closely related to a kind of Manichaeism rather than rationalism. In this sense it is "anterior to Descartes, and fundamentally *irrational*". (EDI, p. 41) Against the principle of rationality that we discover in Descartes, Baudrillard follows the heretics in defining a "principle of evil" by which the actual creation itself was created by an evil demon (EDI: 41). Rather than doubting the world to affirm the self/subject as in Descartes, Baudrillard after the heresiarchs will invoke *seduction* because the world is pure *illusion* according to Manichaeism, tainted from the beginning by an *irreality* principle rather than reality. In fact, these heretics affirmed the *negation of the real* – and, the non-reality of the world which was through and through non-rational. As Baudrillard will tell us they "believed the world, its reality, is made up only of *signs* – and it was governed solely through the mind" (41). So in this sense Baudrillard is an anti-realist, anti-rationalist, and anti-materialist in the physicalist sense. As he'd summarize: "For me to invoke the question of doubt or of non-doubt and to either assert or to question the reality of the world would be futile. The principle fundamentally and from the very beginning is that there is *no* objectivity to the world" (42). So for Baudrillard the manifest illusion of the world is all we have, and we act upon it through signs, through a for of magical thought rather than in semiology through the play of the 'signifier' (Lacan).

Against the semiologists who are still bound to the dialectic of sign/signifier, and as in Zizek/Lacan the search for the *lost object*, etc., in Baudrillard there is no reality to redeem, no world to recognize, no other to reify in the interminable zones of the dialectic. Instead the world is an *effect of the sign*, not its coupling or decoding or redemption. As he remarks, this is "why I invoke the concept of destiny, the concept of destiny of the *sign*... whereas what semiology invokes is a history of the sign as a domesticated product of meaning. This domestication is... to me only a desperate attempt to seek salvation." (45)

The unresolved problem of consciousness is still with us in both philosophy and the sciences. What David Chalmers would term the hard problem of consciousness: (Chalmers 1995) is the problem of explaining the relationship between physical phenomena, such as brain processes, and experience (i.e., phenomenal consciousness, or mental states/events with phenomenal qualities or qualia). As Chalmers himself would say,

The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of *experience*. When we think and perceive, there is a whirl of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. As Nagel (1974) has put it, there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism. This subjective aspect is experience. When we see, for example, we *experience* visual sensations: the felt quality of redness, the experience of dark and light, the quality of depth in a visual field. Other experiences go along with perception in different modalities: the sound of a clarinet, the smell of mothballs. Then there are bodily sensations, from pains to orgasms; mental images that are conjured up internally; the felt quality of emotion, and the experience of a stream of conscious thought. What unites all of these states is that there is something it is like to be in them. All of them are states of experience. 8

The point here is that neurosciences are close to explaining the soft problem of the brain itself, how it generates the world we perceive around us – and, yet, the hard problem of this illusive sense of subjectivity, the sense of the singularity and uniqueness of our personal experience of reality, our memories, our feelings, our desires, etc. All this has no explanation, at least not one that scientists and philosophers can agree on. There are extremes and gray areas that pervade those who have ventured into this territory, but that is for a separate essay. Not today. Today we're comprehending the impact of much of this thought on Baudrillard.

HYPERNORMALIZATION: THE SEDUCTION OF DIABOLICAL IMAGES

For Baudrillard we've all become enamored and seduced into a world of technological diabolism. The world we've come to know and experience is no longer the *real* world, but rather a world generated by an elaborated sociological, historical, and political modulation of the mediatainment complex he terms the strategy of the "evil demon of conformity" (14). The "modern behavior of the masses" are very good at "complying with the models offered to them," and these same masses are "very good at reflecting the objectives imposed on them, thereby absorbing and annihilating them" (14). In fact, as he summarizes it: "There is in this conformity a force of seduction in the literal sense of the word, a force of diversion, distortion, capture and ironic fascination. There is a kind of fatal strategy of conformity." (14)

Of course the notion of fatal strategy is used in Baudrillard's work as a playful and active realignment with Jarry's *Pataphysics*, or the science of imaginary solutions and the laws governing exceptions. In this sense those who are seduced and conform to the seductions of the new medias, who are fascinated by it, their desires captured and channeled, modulated, and revised, diverted and distorted in its hall of mirrors, its funhouse of digital or analog anamorphosis are asleep and ignorant of its power to enslave and imprison them in a hyperworld of normalization: a prison world without bars or jailers. Baudrillard puts it this way, this seductive force, this fatal strategy, is a kind of animal genie or talent – not simply that of the chameleon, which is only its anecdotal form. It is not conformism of animals which delights us; on the contrary, animals are never conformists, they are seductive, they appear to result from a metamorphosis.(14) The animal never adapts to contexts in the way humans do, the animal knows

how to conform, but it is “not to its own being, its own individuality (banal strategy), but to the appearances of the world” (14). It’s this seduction to the Real rather than irrealist seductions of our conformity to the diabolical world of images, to the mediatainment systems that normalize our behaviours and habits to the consumerist society. Animals conform to the world, we conform to the generated worlds of capital, seduced by its glitz and glitter, its false promises and seductions.

In this sense the seductions of violence and war were virtual long before our digital world of computational drones infested the air with their calibrated death gaze and precise and measured systems of destruction. It’s this registering of war as spectacle, as mass event, as cinematic replay and technological reproduction that infest every citizen nightly on the news and normalizes the violence and death *as if* it were banal, a banal strategy like a WWII movie film. For Baudrillard most humans live in their own private Hollywood reality shows, and long before we had mobile phones and Selfies, etc., he would show us this seamy side of our own evil energy and fascination, our seduction to absorb the world into our ongoing films and simulated fictions, our adaptations and appropriations. This mutant world we live in as ironic guests at the banquet of our own delusional mobile app, a production generated for the singular pleasure of our own vein self-gratification. A narcissists paradise of pain and pleasure – *jouissance*.

No real distance, no critical measure or direction, none of the old Socratic self-examination – only the irony of our self-exposure, a reproductive display and spectacle that can be transformed, modulated, replayed, and appropriated by others, by the vast system of algorithms and digital systems of commerce, the hive-mind of code that continuously gathers, stores, analyses, filters, regulates, and broadcasts or circulates our dividual (onlife) to the lucrative outlays of a technocommerical world. We’ve become the commodity in our own self-reproductive productions, a close circuit of image repeated *ad infinitum*. The logical and maximized reproduction of desire captured by its own mechanical engenderment’s. We’ve been seduced into creating our own earthly prison, a desiring machine that controls and conforms our very gaze and productions all within one ubiquitous system.

In the past twenty years we’ve seen a rise in apocalyptic catastrophe films and cinematic reproductions of futural or historical destruction, both natural and artificial types. With 9/11 the implosion of the Real onto the virtual would come full round to the point that this event would generate fantasy narratives that would take on a life of their own after the fact. From conspiracy to the Iraq war with its fantasy worlds of “Weapons of Mass Destruction” generated by that great film company the U.S. Government and George Bush & Comp. who would involve the world in a war generated totally in the simulated universe of the Pentagon. One imagines the secret war rooms hidden below the Pentagon where massive computation and functional systems produce scenario after scenario of doom 24/7 in a simulated world of war generating the terror of our future catastrophes in a predictive world of algorithms.

In this sense as Baudrillard relates it the hot wars of the past are done, the vast arsenal of nuclear weapons and efficient explosive devices that could wipe the human species along with all life from the earth is over. Instead, it will never recur. “What will happen will never be explosion but

implosion. Never again will we see energy in its spectacular and pathetic form – all the romanticism of explosion which had so much charm, since it was also that of revolution – but only the cold energy of simulacra and its distillation in homeopathic doses into the cold systems of information.” (15) Even now most of our wars, our assassinations, our deep runs into the global systems is done remotely, or by remote control through simulated software programs that are becoming more and more automated, independent of human error, artificial life-forms and optimized intelligences, drones and killing machines outside human control.

As Grégoire Chamayou in *A Theory of the Drone* puts it if the “drone lends itself in particular to this kind of approach, it is because it is an “unidentified violent object”: as soon as one tries to think about it in terms of established categories, intense confusion arises around notions as elementary as zones or places (geographical and ontological categories), virtue or bravery (ethical categories), warfare or conflict (categories at once strategic and legal-political). I should first like to explain these crises of intelligibility by bringing to light the contradictions they express. At the root of them all lies the elimination, already rampant but here absolutely radicalized, of any immediate relation of reciprocity.”⁹ In this sense nothing is reciprocal, everything is radically void and empty, without context or meaning.

Baudrillard tells us that this so called “crisis of intelligibility” comes down to the symbolic collapse of our whole system of reciprocity, the representational systems of democracy, the world order, the “entire system, by its internal fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand”.¹⁰ As he continues speaking of 9/11 event as an example of this he says,

The more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point. When global power monopolizes the situation to this extent, when there is such a formidable condensation of all functions in the technocratic machinery, and when no alternative form of thinking is allowed, what other way is there but a terroristic situational transfer? It was the system itself which created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation. By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the Other to change the rules. And the new rules are fierce ones, because the stakes are fierce. To a system whose very excess of power poses an insoluble challenge, the terrorists respond with a definitive act which is also not susceptible of exchange. Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals and cultures) that have paid with their deaths for the installation of a global circulation governed by a single power are taking their revenge today through this terroristic situational transfer. (Spirit, 8)

This non-reciprocal relation of non-exchange in the global system is imploding it from within even as the explosions of its simulated and predictive events enter and shape the actuality of the Real of the world in destructive and violent acts of revenge. We are seeing the inversion of apocalypse, our very generation of simulated catastrophes in the war machines of our global world order are retroactively refitting the actual world with the very contours of terror, engendering the pragmatic and insoluble relations we see around us.

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